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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on women with respect to three themes: the reasons why women are attracted to ethnographic research, the problems they may encounter in making this choice, and the prospects for women researchers to influence the future direction of educational research. Four interrelated psychological aspects seem to attract women to ethnographic research: its emphasis on a holistic perspective; the fact that an ethnographer must establish rapport with participants in the culture; the use of the self as a measuring device; and the dual goals of involvement and detachment. Despite these attractions, choosing to do ethnographic research can create problems for women, such as the stigma of doing "soft" research (non-quantitative, less rigorous) or the potential future perceptions of ethnography as a woman's (devalued) area. A final problem is the time demands involved in ethnography. Despite these problems, there are reasons why women should consider doing ethnographic research. It provides opportunities for developing new theoretical models and new research paradigms. (BW)

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The Ethnography of Education:

Problems and Prospects for Women Researchers

by

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Paper presented at the 1984 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April 25, 1984.

The idea for this paper originated when I began thinking about the growing popularity of educational ethnography, and linked to that, the influence of women within the field. In one sense, this paper is a personal account, since I began by thinking about how and why I chose to do ethnographic research, but it is also intended to contribute to the growing literature on the methodological aspects of doing fieldwork. As Hortense Powdermaker noted: "A scientific discussion of field work method should include considerable detail about the observer: the roles he plays, his personality, and other relevant facts concerning his position and functioning in the society studied." (1966, p. 9). The focus here is on women (notwithstanding Powdermaker's use of the term 'he') with respect to three themes: the reasons why women are attracted to ethnographic research, the problems they may encounter in making this choice, and the prospects for women researchers to influence the future direction of educational research.

That women already have a strong influence within the field of educational ethnography cannot be doubted. A casual review of names produced the following list: Courtney Cazden, Thelma Cook, Carole Edelsky, Susan Florio, Perry Gilmore, Judith Green, Shirley Heath, Evelyn Jacob, Margaret LeCompte, Susan Philips, Jay Schensul, Elaine Simon, Cynthia Wallat, and Kathleen Wilcox. And this list is hardly exhaustive; with a concentrated review, dozens more names could be added. In contrast, women have not achieved anywhere near the same influence in what might be called 'mainstream' educational research. A quick content analysis of a very recent textbook, the 1983 edition of Educational Research, by Walter Borg and Meredith Gall (selected because it mentions ethnographic methods) revealed that out of 719 citations, only 80 were women. When one uses the criterion of women as first authors, the number drops to 48, or

approximately 7%. In the chapters on measurement and statistics, and experimental designs, the number of women cited drops to less than five. Examining other textbooks is not likely to produce much better results; in fact, I think it quite likely the numbers would be even worse.

Leaving aside the politics of research for a later discussion (which is beyond the scope of this paper), it seems clear women are more attracted to field based methods of research. This point has been noted in the field of Anthropology, where some of the classic field studies have been done by women (Benedict, 1934; Mead, 1930; Landes, 1947; Powdermaker, 1966; Thomson and Joseph, 1947; Underhill, 1938). What is it, then, that attracts women to ethnographic research? My answer is that there are four psychological aspects which seem to be interrelated.

A chief characteristic of any ethnography is an emphasis on a holistic perspective. An ethnographer must take all the observed scenes and connect them in order to see the underlying cultural patterns. This need to make connections dovetails nicely with women's psychological need to make connections. Carol Gilligan (1982) noted that women differ from men on precisely this dimension, a desire to view people and events as interrelated, rather than as abstract, individual entities. As the ethnography unfolds and begins to take shape, it satisfies a woman's sense of how life itself unfolds: that all the random bits of behavior combine to form a unity of being within the culture.

In order to gather good data, an ethnographer must establish rapport with participants in the culture. The better rapport she develops with her informants the more she will learn about a particular event, or the culture itself. Developing this rapport, plus a willingness to listen well, are skills which come more easily to women by virtue of their own socialization into Western culture. Listening well is especially important in the early stages of research,

when the ethnographer knows relatively little. During this time, the desire to assert one's own viewpoint must be controlled; self effacement, too, comes more easily to women.

A third attraction is the use of the self as a measuring device. In ethnographic research, the observer is the instrument, and as Peggy Golde commented, "using oneself as an instrument of research, all feedback must be carefully considered because it can reveal the strengths and weaknesses of that self as a measuring device" (1970, p. 92). In this respect, women are more accustomed to using themselves as an emotional barometer to monitor the feelings of others. Golde emphasized this point when she noted:

> But if there is a difference between male and female anthropologists brought up in our culture, maybe it is that women are more willing to a greater extent to screen experience through their own emotional net, to use their own feelings as a guide to understanding others and to participate in a subjective way in whatever social setting they find themselves (1970, p. 93).

While immersion and involvement are critical for understanding, at some point a good ethnographer must stand back to observe the culture objectively. Hortense Powdermaker(1966) called this dualism the heart of the participant observation method - involvement and detachment. And I suggest that this dualism represents the greatest attraction of all: to be involved, yet stand apart from the scene; to be detached, yet return to make connections again. For women, it utilizes the aspects of personality which are the most 'feminine': to be involved with others, to experience emotions and feelings empathically, and to lose oneself within the setting. Yet, at the same time, they must call upon other aspects of their personality deemed 'masculine': to become detached, to look objectively, and to analyze rationally. The image being described of an ethnographer is that it requires what Sandra Bem (1973) has labelled the

androgynous personality.[1] This type of personality is not restricted to women alone. I would hypothesize that men who are attracted to ethnography are those who have managed, in the words, of Theodore Roszak, to liberate "the 'woman' every man has locked up in the dungeons of his own psyche." (1969, p. 101).

Despite its attractions, choosing to do ethnographic research in education can create problems for women. Although ethnographic research is becoming more accepted within the field (Erickson, 1979; Rist, 1977; Wilson, 1977), the problems discussed below stem from the fact that change comes slowly, and women should proceed with caution.

One problem is that in many circles, ethnographic research still bears the stigma of being considered 'soft' research, less rigorous than the methods utilizing experimental and quasi-experimental designs, and complex statistical manipulations. A short anecdote illustrates my point. When I was discussing different modes of analysis with a male colleague, he noted there were two: descriptive and inferential, both referring to the use of statistics. When I mentioned there were non-statistical methods, as well, he replied, "Yes, but I would prefer a more positive term than non-statistical". My reply was that for some people, non-statistical was positive. His reaction to this statement was clearly not positive.

The risk for women is that by choosing to do ethnographic research, they may be perceived by their male colleagues as doing so to avoid the use of statistics. The risk increases if the researcher has not had any quantitative training. Two points need to be emphasized here. One, the perception of women's lack of competence in quantitative research stems from a bias against ethnographic research, and has nothing to do with women's actual or potential competence in quantitative research. That women who choose quantitative research are quite competent is evident if one looks at the careers of some distinguished women in the field, one of whom, Anna Anastasi, delivered the

AERA award address this year. My concern is that women's choice to do ethnographic research becomes linked with perceptions of their ability; the choice is not considered in relation to the merits of the research itself. And if a woman researcher has not demonstrated that she can handle quantitative data in previous research studies, she is likely to encounter some discrimination, either in the form of outright hostility, or in half joking comments (e.g., when are you going to do some 'real' research?).

A second point is that the perception of ethnographic research as less rigorous or 'scientific' is a function of ignorance. There are numerous examples in the anthropological literature of ethnographic studies which use statistical methods for data analysis. The issue is not whether one uses statistics or not, but how one collects the data to be analyzed. One difference is in whether one uses an "emic" or "etic" approach. There are studies in which both approaches have been combined, utilizing the best of both worlds (Jacob, 1982; Spindler & Spindler, 1965).

A second problem is one which I don't think currently exists, but it could develop in the future. As more women enter the field of educational ethnography, it may be perceived as a woman's area, and consequently, become devalued. This claim is not as far fetched as it sounds. Carolyn Heilbrun, president-elect of the Modern Langauge Association, noted in a recent address to the American Association of University Professors that as the number of women increases in the field of literary criticism, some men in academe react to female scholars "as if the madwoman had indeed come out of the attic to destroy the furniture of these mansions they have inherited and now occupy." In a paper prepared by the Committee on the Role and Status of Women in Educational Research and Development, the authors commented that "women's intellectual work is devalued even when it is part of the mainstream and not

directly concerned with women's issues." (1983, p. 14). If more women choose to work outside the current educational research mainstream, educational ethnography may become 'feminized' and thus less attractive to future male scholars.

As an aside, when I taught the first educational ethnography course at my university, I had seven females and two males enrolled. I learned later several male graduate students refused to enroll because of its "touchy feely" orientation. While I certainly don't expect every student[2] to become enamoured of ethnographic research, I find this type of prejudice extremely tiresome to overcome.

The last problem is not a substantive one, but it certainly embodies the reality principle as reflected in real life demands. That problem is time constraints. A good ethnography requires time, both in doing one (anywhere from six months to several years) and in the writing and publishing of results. Women researchers outside large research institutions are likely to be burdened with large teaching and advising loads, as well as committee and service work (not to mention family and child care commitments, for which women still bear the primary responsibility[3]). Added to their burden may be an unsympathetic Chair or Dean, who is unfamiliar with the demands of the methodology, and finds the time spent on a single project to be excessive, especially when it doesn't lead to immediate publication. (I would like to acknowledge publicly this is not a problem for me - my department Chair is extremely supportive of my research.) Women who want to engage in ethnographic research should consider carefully the research expectations held within their academic institution.

Despite these problems, there are reasons why women should consider doing ethnographic research. One exciting prospect is that social science research in general is undergoing a paradigm shift, and it is apparent new theoretical models are needed to explain human activity. In the field of education,

models of the educational process derived from ethnographic data are now being developed, and the opportunity is there for women to make leading theoretical contributions. Judith Green's (1983) review of teaching as a linguistic process, based on ethnographic studies of classroom discourse, is one notable example.

Educational ethnographers also have the opportunity to develop new research paradigms to study classroom life. Two leading ethnographers, Judith Green and Cynthia Wallat, have written about the concept of "action research", whereby the researcher collaborates closely with teachers in the field. By their close involvement with classroom life, ethnographers can provide school personnel with information which can be used to effect significant changes. Although this has not been a primary goal in the past, Courtney Cazden (1983) noted that ethnography must move beyond mere description to exploring ways to make schools better.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education has documented serious flaws in our educational system. While research utilizing quantitative methods has been useful for testing hypotheses about the effects of specific programs, it cannot provide contextual information about the process by which children learn to succeed or fail. Ethnography can, and new collaborative research models, involving teaching personnel (who primarily are women), are needed to take up the challenge of reform. Women who have historically been left outside the mainstream of educational research should find ethnography appealing as one means of addressing the needs of our rapidly changing educational system.

Footnotes

[1]I do not think it a coincidence that Ursula LeGuin, daugher of a well known anthropologist, Alfred Kroeber, should be the one to write a science fiction novel, The Left Hand of Darkness, which discusses life on an alien planet where people can exchange male and female roles (on both physical and psychological dimensions) at will. It is a fascinating book to read, albeit a bit unsettling.

[2]At the time of writing this paper, my program faculty is currently revising the Ph.D. program in Educational Research, and one of the proposed revisions is that all students be required to take the ethnography course. I give my colleagues enormous credit for their willingness to take ethnographic research seriously.

[3]When I read accounts of women's fieldwork in other cultures, it didn't escape my notice that they were single for the most part, or if married, their husbands did not mind their prolonged absence. They certainly did not have children. A recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education noted several women have chosen to take their children into the field, which had both its advantages and disadvantages (Note 1).

Reference Notes

1. Chronicle of Higher Education, November 30, 1983, 17-19.

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